

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Beatitudes	Pastor/Teacher
Number:	2	Gary L.W. Johnson
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BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

What an astonishing statement! The Sermon on the Mount begins by taking us down into the valley. Why begin so low? Why not start off at a higher level?¹ But this is, as Lloyd-Jones points out, “the key to all that follows.”² The word used for *poor* is *ptochos*. It is an old word, very common in classical Greek. It means *to cover, to cringe*. It describes someone who is not merely poor, but completely destitute. In classical Greek the word was *always* used in a bad sense. In the Gospels we find the ennobled.³ Many have misread this as if Jesus was actually declaring *physical* poverty to be a noble thing. Poverty can be the result of sloth or squandering one’s resources (cf. Luke 15:11ff – the prodigal son). “In interpreting Jesus’ Beatitudes we must,” cautions Bruner, “always avoid the Clune of spiritualization on the one side and the Conway of secularization on the other. If we say that *Blessed are the poor in spirit* means *blessed are the rich too, if they act humbly*, we have spiritualized the text. On the other hand, if we say that *Blessed are the poor* means *poor people are happy people*, we have secularized the text.”⁴

I. A DESCRIPTION OF THE POOR-SPIRITED. Note the text does *not* say, “You *ought* to be poor in spirit” or “Blessed are they who become poor in spirit.” The first thing that is spelled out in the Sermon on the Mount is this: we *cannot* fulfill the Beatitudes by ourselves. “Paradoxically, Jesus teaches that the Sermon on the Mount is only for those who know that they cannot live by it.”⁵ Mark the words of W. G. T. Shedd, “The Sermon on the Mount is called the Sermon of the Beatitudes, and many have the impression that it is a very lovely song to the sinful soul of man. They forget that the blessing upon obedience implies a *curse* upon disobedience, and that every mortal man has disobeyed the Sermon on the Mount. *God save me* – said a thoughtful person who knew what is in the Sermon on the Mount, and what is in the human heart – *God save me from the Sermon on the Mount when I am judged in the last day.*”⁶

A. This Condition is Known. Instead of seeking to count one’s riches before God, the spiritually destitute declare, in the words of the Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs, “I am wholly destitute of every good thing that may make me anyway acceptable to God.”⁷ It refers to those who stand “empty-handed, without a power base the pretense, before God.”⁸ A. W. Pink, in describing this, writes: “It is the opposite of that haughty, self-assertive and self-sufficient disposition which the world so much admires and praises. It is the very reverse of that independent and defiant attitude which refuses to bow to God, which determines to brave things out, which says with Pharaoh, *Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice?* To be *poor in spirit* is to realize that I have nothing, am nothing, and can do nothing, and have need of all things. Poverty of spirit is a consciousness of my emptiness, the result of the Spirit’s work within: It issues from the painful discovery that all my righteousnesses are as filthy rags. It follows the awakening that my best performances are unacceptable, yea, an abomination to the thrice Holy One. Poverty of spirit evidences itself by its bringing the individual into the dust before God, acknowledging his utter helplessness and deservingness of hell. It corresponds to the initial awakening of the prodigal in the far country, when he *began to be in want*. God’s great salvation is free, *without money and without price*. This is a most merciful provision

of Divine grace, for were God to offer salvation for sale no sinner could secure it, seeing that he has nothing with which he could possibly purchase it. But the vast majority are insensible of this, yea, all of us are until the Holy Spirit opens our sin-blinded eyes. It is only those who have passed from death unto life who become conscious of their poverty, take the place of beggars, are glad to receive Divine charity, and begin to seek the true riches. Thus *the poor have the Gospel preached to them* (Matt. 6:5): preached not only to their ears, but to their hearts!"⁹ To this Stott adds: "Thus, to be *poor in spirit* is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, indeed our spiritual bankruptcy, before God. For we are sinners, under the holy wrath of God, and deserving nothing but the judgment of God. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to buy the favour of heaven.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

This is the language of the poor in spirit. We do not belong anywhere except alongside the publican in Jesus' parable, crying out with downcast eyes, *God, be merciful to me a sinner!* As Calvin wrote: *He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit.*"¹⁰

- B. ***This Condition is Irreparable.*** Again, listen to Burroughs, "Suppose I have many miseries upon me, yet if I am able to work for myself, I cannot be extremely poor; but when the man hath many miseries upon him, and is not able to work for his livelihood, then is he poor indeed. So it is, though we have lost the image of God, yet if we were able to do anything to help ourselves we were not so poor, but now, when a man sees himself thus miserable, and can do nothing for himself to get any good for the enriching of his soul, he is poor."¹¹
- C. ***This Condition is Continual.*** Those who are stricken with poverty and are *unable* to work, must live upon *continual* alms – this is the meaning of *ptochos*. So the *poor in spirit must* live in continual dependence upon God. "This kind of spiritual poverty is specially commended in Isaiah. It is the *poor and needy* who *seek water and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, for whom God promises to open rivers on the bare heights, and foundation in the midst of the valleys, and to make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of waters* (Isaiah 41:17, 18). The *poor* are also described as people with a *contrite and humble spirit*; to them God looks and with them (though he is *the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy*) he is pleased to dwell (Isaiah 57:15; 66: 1, 2)."¹²

II. ***PROMISES TO THE POOR-SPIRITED.*** What will satisfy the poor in spirit? Not the forgiveness of sin (a great blessing!), but the promise has to do with the "Kingdom of heaven."

- A. ***The Nature of This Blessing.*** There is nothing in this world that can actually make the poor in spirit blessed. "If you would be happy," declares Burroughs, "you must look beyond the world."¹⁴
- B. ***The Time of This Blessing.*** Note the *present* tense: Theirs *is* the Kingdom of heaven. The rewards of vv. 4-9 are *all* future. The first and last promises are present. "The natural conclusion is that the full blessedness of those described in these beatitudes awaits the consummated Kingdom, they already share in the Kingdom's blessedness so far as it has been inaugurated."¹⁵

C. *The Comfort of This Blessing.* How is this a present comfort? It has to do with what is promised, as such it pertains to the *condition* of the poor in spirit and therefore corresponds.

CONCLUSION: The great Puritan preacher Jeremiah Burroughs wrote, “What comfort the poor may have when they are also poor in spirit – those whose spirits are akin to their outward condition. Those who willingly submit to God in a poor condition honour him when they submit without murmuring. They may be encouraged by their share in the kingdom of heaven. Your King was poor in this world himself and suffered hard things. If men in the army have only water to drink, yet it is as much as the general has; it is well with them! So Christ may well say, *Are you dejected because of your poverty? Are you poorer than I was?* He was made poor that we might be rich! (2 Cor. 8:9). Ordinarily it is the poor of this world that are subjects of Christ’s kingdom. The Lord has been very little beholden to the great ones of the world for the furthering of his kingdom. Poverty is no hindrance to the highest degree in the kingdom of heaven! It may be a hindrance to honour in the kingdoms of the world, but not in the kingdom of heaven. When it is time to choose officers in the church, there should be no consideration of a man’s estate, but of spiritual power. The poorest of men may have more godliness and understanding in the kingdom of heaven than others, and are as qualified as any whatsoever. The poor have all the privileges of this kingdom! In this kingdom are spiritual riches that are infinitely beyond all outward riches! If you prize riches over the kingdom of heaven, and believe that given so much you would be a happy man, this shows a carnal heart. The kingdom of heaven makes you rich in faith in holiness, in promises, in God and Christ, and in the enjoyments of the Holy Spirit and his gifts and graces. In the kingdom of heaven these spiritual riches are abundantly supplied. And, at last, the godly poor will possess all things! They will be as stones in a crown and shine as bright as the sun!”¹⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ The late Robert Schuller, the well-known television personality and author of the book *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, contends that only by starting at the highest level (“Healthy persons who will really feel good about themselves” – p. 39) can we really follow the example of Jesus. Schuller writes: “Luther and Calvin, we know, looked to the Book of Romans in the Bible for their primary inspiration. Were they, unknowingly, possessed more by the spirit of St. Paul than by the Spirit of Jesus Christ? Are we not on safer grounds if we look to our Lord’s work to launch our reformation?” (Ibid.). Schuller is guilty of selective reading of Jesus’ teaching (and St. Paul, since he later in the book cites the Apostle to prove a point, cf. p. 69). The Lord Jesus began by stressing the absolute bankruptcy of the human spirit.

² D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon On the Mount* (Eerdman, 1959), p. 42.

³ J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (rpt. Eerdman, 1970), p. 559.

⁴ F. D. Bruner, *The Christbook: A Historical/Theological Commentary I* (Word, 1987), p. 135.

⁵ J. M. Boice, *The Sermon On the Mount: An Exposition* (Zondervan, 1972), p. 23.

⁶ W. G. T. Shedd, *Sermon to the Natural Man* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. IV.

⁷ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Saints’ Happiness: Delivered in Divers Lectures On the Beatitudes* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1986), p. 14.

⁸ R. A. Guelich, *The Sermon On the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Word, 1982), p. 71.

⁹ A. W. Pink, *An Exposition of The Sermon on The Mount* (rpt. Baker, 1982), p. 17.

¹⁰ Stott, op. cit., p. 39.

¹¹ Burroughs, op. cit.

¹² J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon On the Mount* (InterVarsity, 1978), p. 39.

¹³ This phrase appears thirty-two times in Matthew and nowhere else in the New Testament. Dispensationalists have labored to show that the “Kingdom of heaven” and the “Kingdom of God” are entirely two different things (Matthew uses them interchangeably in 19:23, 24). This position ignores the purpose of Jesus to establish a *present spiritual Kingdom*. Cf. Matthew 12:28; Colossians 1:13; Philippians 3:20.

¹⁴ Burroughs, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Zondervan, 1984), p. 132.

¹⁶ J. Burroughs, *The Saints’ Happiness* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1982), p. 31.